



Four Great Libraries of Medieval Baghdad

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FOUR GREAT LIBRARIES OF MEDIEVAL BAGHDAD

AMONG the glories of Baghdad during the days of the Abbasids were its exceptionally fine libraries. Many of the caliphs of that line were patrons of learning and delighted in collecting ancient and contemporary literature. Before their time some of the princes of the Umayyad dynasty had begun to gather and translate Greek scientific literature. Khālīd Ibn Yāzīd, for example, cultivated Greek and Coptic studies on alchemy and medicine and founded what was probably the first public library among the Arabs.¹ But the Abbasids were the first to foster Greek learning on a large scale; and Al Maṣṣūr, the founder of Baghdad, was one of its first patrons. This enthusiasm for the products of older cultures grew and expanded to include also works of Persian and Indian sources. Scholars were employed to gather, copy, translate, and comment on all sorts of literature from any and all sources. Much of Greek learning came through Syriac translations, and thereby Arabic savants familiarized themselves with Christian scholarship. Learning, in a sense, may be said to have become fashionable at court; and viziers and other associates of the caliphs followed their examples and supported scholars and literary men, whom they drew to them. Poets and learned men delighted to gather about their patrons to read and discuss. These groups in some cases, as will be seen in that of the coterie of Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr, developed into academies.

It is only natural that libraries, small and large, were soon being collected. Many of them were private collections intended only for the use of the owners and their immediate friends, but the libraries of the caliphs and other officials soon took on a public or a semi-public character. Books which were painstakingly copied and purchased at great expense were

¹ Yāqūt, *Biographical dictionary*, "Gibb series," IV, 165 ff.; *Encyclopedia of Islam* article "Kitabkhana," p. 1045.

worthy of preservation; and their possessors bequeathed them to mosques, shrines, or schools where they could be properly cared for and made accessible to scholars for ages to come. Professors of colleges quite frequently gave their own works and private libraries to their respective institutions. Books are often mentioned among the *waqfs* or pious bequests made in perpetuity by scholars and men of wealth. This was one way in which writers could make sure that their works would not be lost. They often willed their books either to the people of learning or to Muslims in general. Yākūt, author of the celebrated geographical and biographical dictionaries, on his death in 1229, left his books as *waqf* to the Zaidī shrine on Dinar Street in Baghdad.¹ On the other hand, one irate old scholar, Abu Ḥaiyān al Tawhīdī, indignant at lack of attention which he felt was due him from the people of Baghdad, burned his books shortly before his death, thereby proclaiming that he deemed his fellow-citizens incapable of appreciating true learning.²

The nature of the collections, of course, then as now, varied with the interests of their owners. In general, one gathers the impression that the earlier great libraries and the private collections, often of courtiers who were interested in polite literature as well as in more weighty works, were rich and exceedingly varied. Later the large libraries were chiefly in mosques and theological schools, and their collections were more restricted to books dealing chiefly with Quranic exegesis, theology, and canon law. Frequently this broadened out to include works on geography, history, philology, and other subjects necessary to the understanding of the strictly religious studies. Every library seems to have contained many beautifully written copies of the Quran.

This article describes four of the great libraries of Baghdad and the institutions which housed them. The earliest is that of the famous Al Mamūn, who was caliph from 813 to 833. Another was established by Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr in 991 or 993 for the literary men and scholars who frequented his academy. Unfortunately, it was plundered and burned by the Seljuks about

¹ *Ibn Khallikān* (ed. Wüstenfeld; Göttingen, 1835—), No. 800, p. 17.

² Yākūt, *op. cit.*, V, 386.

seventy years later. It is a good example of the sort of library built up out of the needs and interests of a literary society. The last two are examples of *madrasa* or theological college libraries. The Nizāmīyah was founded by the Persian Nizām al Mulk, who was vizier of two early Seljuk sultans. It continued undisturbed after the coming of the Mongols in 1258. The Mustanṣirīyah *madrasa*, which owned an exceedingly rich library, was the foundation of Al Mustanṣir, the second last Abbasid caliph, who died in 1242. This was the last great edifice built by the caliphs of Baghdad.

Probably the most interesting aspect of these libraries is the important place they held in the cultural life of the time. They were no musty storehouses where books lay seldom used and at the mercy of ignorant attendants. Instead, one sees them as centers in which assembled literary men and learned doctors. Books were gathered by men who loved them, and were in constant use by scholars and eager students. These libraries were busy places. The librarians, frequently men noted for their attainments in many fields, went out or sent others to gather rare and precious books which, if necessary, were copied and translated into Arabic. The position of librarian in Muslim lands during the medieval ages must have been an honorable one, for in these four libraries, as in others, it was often filled by great scholars, chosen apparently for their knowledge of books. They were figures important in the society of their times and often at court, members, rather than mere servants, of the cultured and learned groups which gathered in the libraries.

THE LIBRARY OF THE CALIPH AL MAMŪN

Probably the first great library in Baghdad was that founded by Al Mamūn, the seventh Abbasid, who was caliph from 198 to 218 (813-33 A.D.). He established an institution variously known as the Bait al Hikma ("House of Wisdom"), Dār al Hikma ("Palace of Wisdom"), or Khizāna al Hikma ("Treasury of Wisdom"). It consisted of an astronomical observatory and a library. Our information on this institution is exceedingly scanty. Most of it comes from the *Fihrist*, an early and valuable

source of information on books and authors. There seems to be no detailed description of the House of Wisdom. One would like to know how it was housed and administered, how the books were preserved, whether they were catalogued, more details concerning the nature and size of the collections, and the sort of people who used them.

Al Mamūn, like his father Harūn al Rāshīd, was a patron of learning. Both enjoyed the company of scholars and encouraged their presence at court. Harūn also had a library, for the *Fihrist* refers to two literary men who served him there. Abu Sahl al Faḍl, according to the author of the *Fihrist*, wrote seven books and was a scholar in whose knowledge of Persian literature the caliph had great confidence. He was accordingly employed to translate Persian books into Arabic for the library of his patron.¹ ʿUllān al Shuʿūbī, a genealogist, served as copyist for Harūn, his viziers the Barmecides, and later for Al Mamūn.² The first translation of Euclid's *Elements* was made for Harūn and probably was one of the treasures of his library.³

Al Mamūn (813-33 A.D.) was tremendously interested in all fields of learning and was the possessor himself of no mean intellectual abilities, so that his desire to collect rare and valuable books was based on more than a mere acquisitive tendency. His observatory was a laboratory in which scientists studied, experimented, and wrote. It is said that all the sciences were represented there. Astronomy was much mixed with astrology, in which the caliph had great faith; yet much genuinely scientific work was carried on under the direction of Yahya. This man, member of the famous Munajjim family, a client of Al Mamūn and one of his converts to Islam, was attached to the caliph as astrologer-astronomer.⁴ Another scientist, Al Khwārizmī, the author of an algebra and the compiler of an almanac which was long considered authoritative,⁵ was in the habit of retiring into Al Mamūn's library for study. Both of his works

¹ *Fihrist*, p. 274.

² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143; Abu l Faraj (Barhebraus) (Beirut, 1890), p. 264.

⁵ *Fihrist*, p. 274.

were made at the request of the caliph. Many other famous scientists of the time were at the court of Al Mamūn.

There was a keen desire to know everything which had been written by scientists of other and older cultures. Only as one realizes that every scrap of information had to be translated first into Arabic, a language which only recently had come to be used for scientific purposes, and hence possessed originally little or no technical terminology, can one in some measure appreciate the task which lay before these men. The marvel is that the task was done as quickly and thoroughly as it was.

The most outstanding contribution of Al Mamūn's astronomers was the celebrated "Verified Tables," based on their own observations which they made to verify the fundamental elements of the *Almagest*. These, in turn, were checked against the observations made at a mountain observatory north of Damascus, which was also under the patronage of Al Mamūn.¹

Some of the translations were made directly from Greek, and others from Syriac; hence, men thoroughly versed in both languages were much in demand. Among the most capable translators of the ninth century were the group headed by Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq, a Christian physician. It is often difficult to discover which translations are from his hands and which from those of his school which included his equally famous son, Ishāq Ibn Ḥunayn.²

The caliph, however, did not limit his patronage to the sciences but cultivated other types of literature as well. Being an ardent Muʿtazilite, that is, an adherent of a decidedly rationalistic system of theology, he encouraged the study of Greek philosophy. This, as in the case of the sciences, entailed the arduous task of translation. A large staff was busy copying and translating Persian, Syriac, and Indian, as well as Greek, books. Al Mamūn's tastes were exceedingly catholic, and he did not consider it beneath the dignity of the leader of Islam to col-

¹ *Ibn Khallikān* (tr. B. M. G. DeSlane; 4 vols.; Paris, 1842-71), III, 605; C. A. Nallino, article "Astronomy," *Encyclopedia of Islam*, p. 498.

² *Ibn Khallikān*, Wüstenfeld, No. 208, p. 127; article "Ḥunayn Ibn Ishāq," *Encyclopedia of Islam*; H. Suter, *Die Mathematiker und Astronomer d. Araber und ihre Werke* (Leipzig, 1900), p. 21.

lect entertaining stories from Persian and Indian sources and to employ able men to translate them into Arabic. Large sums of money must have been required to finance all this work, for one cannot fail to notice that the scribes and translators engaged were not mere hack workers but often men of scholarly attainments, whose names were worthy to be recorded by Muhammad Ibn Ishāq in his *Fihrist*, a catalogue of authors and their books. One reads repeatedly after the names of writers, "he copied," or "he translated for Al Mamūn in his House of Wisdom." One of his bookbinders, Ibn Abi al Harīsh, was a man of sufficient skill to have his name preserved.¹ On page 6 of the *Fihrist* there is a specimen of Himyaritic writing, which Muhammad Ibn Ishāq, the author, copied from a volume entirely in this South Arabian script, which he saw in the library of Al Mamūn. The introduction to the book was, "One of those whose copying was ordered by the Commander of the Faithful, Abd Allah al Mamūn."² The physician Ibn Abi Uṣaibi'a,³ writing in the middle of the thirteenth century (A.D.), mentions having seen a number of books in the handwriting of Al Azraq, the scribe of Hunayn Ibn Ishāq,⁴ which bore the mark or symbol of Al Mamūn, who had authorized their translation. Was this the caliph's stamp or seal, used on all books belonging to his library, or does the word *alāma* (mark, sign, or symbol) refer to a similar phrase to that which prefaced the book described by the author of the *Fihrist*? Possibly the latter also refers to a stamp which contained the words quoted above.

We have no record of the amount expended by Al Mamūn on his books and translations; but three brothers, known as the Banu Mūsa, also patrons of learning, though perhaps on a smaller scale than the caliph, supported a staff of translators which is reputed to have cost them 500 *dinars* a month. These brothers were, at least for a time, associated with Yahya in the House of Wisdom.⁵

¹ *Fihrist*, p. 10.

² P. 5, ll. 29-30.

³ Ibn Abi Uṣaibi'a, *Kitab ʿuyūn al-anbāʾ fī ṭabaqāt al-aʿibbaʾ* (edit. A. Müller, 1884), I, 187, ll. 26-27.

⁴ See p. 283.

⁵ *Fihrist*, pp. 243, 271; *Ibn Khallikān* (DeSlane's translation), III, 315 ff.; Abu l Faraj (Beirut, 1890), p. 264.

Al Mamūn also had a flare for rarities. He owned a book which was supposed to be in the handwriting of Abd al Muṭṭalib, the grandfather of the prophet Muhammad. Such a pretty fraud must have brought some book-dealer a handsome sum.¹

One would like to know more about the famous men who, like Al Khwārizmī, retired into this library for study. It was the source of much information for Muhammad Ibn Isḥāq, when he compiled the *Fihrist*, which he published in 377 (988 A.D.). Untold riches must have been housed in this center of learning which flourished until the city was sacked by the Mongols in 656 (1258 A.D.).

THREE LIBRARIANS OF AL MAMŪN'S LIBRARY

The *Fihrist* mentions three men, well known in the literary world of the time, who were given the title of sāhib of the House or Treasury of Wisdom belonging to Al Mamūn. It has been seen that this institution consisted of more than a library; hence, they may have been directors of the entire plant. Salm seems to have been the only one of the three noted for his scientific interests, but his duties were those of a collector and translator of scientific books rather than those of an active scientist. All three, however, were literary men whose names appear in connection with the books of the House of Wisdom, and hence in all probability may be regarded as librarians. It is uncertain whether all of them served in this capacity at the same time; but it is evident that there were at least two librarians at a time, for Salm and Sa'īd Ibn Hārūn at different places are mentioned as associates of Sahl Ibn Hārūn, who appears as the most outstanding of the group. Apparently, all three men were of equal rank in the institution, for they all are spoken of as sāhibs and as colleagues rather than any one of them as an assistant to another.²

Sahl is the best known of these librarians. One wonders if he may not have been the son of Abu Sahl al Faḍl, who translated Persian works in the library of Hārūn al Rashīd.³ Sahl, a man of Persian family, first emigrated to Baṣra, and later became

¹ *Fihrist*, p. 5.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 120, 125, 305.

³ See p. 282.

attached to Al Mamūn, whom he served faithfully. The caliph found his strong anti-Arab tendencies very acceptable. He was celebrated for the elegance of his style, his abilities as a poet and rhetorician, his wisdom, eloquence, and knowledge of books.

During the Abbasid period, two types of stories became exceedingly popular: the strange and wonderful tales known as "Khurāfāt" and those called "Asmār"—night stories, that is, tales told for evening entertainment, one story often requiring several sessions for its telling.¹ Not only were stories of Persian, Indian, and Greek origin zealously collected, but professional scribes did not hesitate to fabricate and pass off their own tales. Sahl's name is frequently associated with that of Ibn al Mukaffa^c, who made the famous Arabic translation of *Kalīla wa Dimna*.² Inasmuch as they were not contemporaries (Ibn al Mukaffa^c made his translation about 750 A.D.; Sahl died 859–60), it seems likely that for the author of the *Fihrist* they were outstanding among the literary men, who made popular in Arabic the type of story in which birds and animals, as well as men, are the speakers. Sahl was not satisfied with merely collecting and translating old Persian and Indian material but also wrote a book in imitation of *Kalīla wa Dimna*.³ The only one of his works which has survived is a treatise in praise of avarice. It was much admired by his contemporary Al Djahiz, whom he greatly influenced and who quoted him extensively.⁴ Perhaps this essay was merely an example of the sort of rhetorical feat which delighted fashionable writers of the time; or, as Goldziher has suggested, it may be that, as a *Shu'ubi* (one of those who opposed the arrogance of the Arabs as over against the

¹ *Fihrist*, pp. 304, 305.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 304, 305, 308. On *Kalīla wa Dimna* see Introduction to I. G. N. Keith-Falconer's translation (Cambridge, 1885), and V. Chauvin, *Bibliographie des ouvrages Arabes ou relatifs aux Arabes etc.*, Vol. II, *Kalilah* (Liège-Leipzig, 1897).

³ *Fihrist*, pp. 120, 305, 308; Hajji Khalifa, *Lexicon bibliographicum* (7 vols.; London, 1835–58), V, 238, 239; *Ibn Khallikān* (DeSlane's translation), I, 511, n. 5; article "Sahl Ibn Hārūn" in *Encyclopedia of Islam*.

⁴ *Ibn Khallikān*, I, 509, 510.

non-Arab Muslims), he is here giving the thrust at the national Arab virtue of generosity.¹

However, Ibn Khallikān considered the essay consistent with an outstanding trait of Sahl's character and gives an anecdote to illustrate the great man's extreme parsimony. He had guests one day who conversed so long that the hungry host was finally forced to order his dinner. It consisted of a dry old fowl, too tough to carve or chew. Discovering that the head was missing, he berated the cook, who claimed he had thrown it away, thinking Sahl would scorn to eat anything so mean. "Thou didst think wrong, thou scoundrel. By Allah! I hate the man who would throw away the claws; judge then how I must feel toward him who throweth away the head. . . . I know where it is, thou hast thrown it down thy throat, but God shall call thee to an account for it!"²

Salm (the name is sometimes written "Salmā" or "Salmān") was also among those interested in the *Kalīla wa Dimna*, a book originally of Indian origin which came into Arabic through the Pehlēvi translation. He must have possessed considerable linguistic ability. He is remembered, not only as a translator from Middle Persian, but also as a member of the commission sent by Al Mamūn to the Emperor Leo, the Armenian, to obtain Greek philosophical and scientific books, which were later translated into Arabic.³ It is related that Aristotle appeared to Al Mamūn in a vision and discoursed with him on the importance of reason. As a result, the caliph sent out this commission to obtain Greek books for his library. The envoys brought back all sorts of rare books, works on philosophy, geometry, mechanics, music, arithmetic, and medicine. They were soon translated by some of the great scholars who were pleased to be in the employ of Al Mamūn. The first Arabic translation of the *Almagest* of Ptolemy was authorized by Yahya b. Khālid, the Barmacide (died 190 [805 A.D.]); but it was apparently incomplete and generally unsatisfactory to

¹ Ignác Goldziher, *Mohammedanische Studien* (2 vols; Halle, 1888-90), I, 14, 161.

² *Ibn Khallikān* (DeSlane's translation), I, 509, 510.

³ *Fihrist*, p. 243; Hajji Khalifa, III, 95.

the vizier. He then commissioned Salm and a certain Abu Ḥassān to prepare a translation and commentary, which was made with painstaking care, the work being thoroughly corrected.¹

Of the three great librarians who served Al Mamūn, the least is known of Saʿīd Ibn Hārūn. The *Fihrist* refers to him among the great rhetoricians of Islam and as the author of a collection of letters or tractates (*risā-il*) and a book on philosophy and its benefits. His opinions were of sufficient importance to be quoted by Al Djāhiz, best known as the author of *The book of animals* (*Kitab al Ḥayawān*).²

THE LIBRARY OF SĀBŪR IBN ARDASHĪR

In 380 (990–91 A.D.) the Buyid, Baha al Dawla, appointed Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr as his vizier, but dismissed him the following year. In 382 (992–93 A.D.) he restored him, but again Sābūr's power lasted but a year, for in 383 his house was sacked and he was forced to go into hiding. The years 386 and 390 found him in office for two short periods. Either in 381 or in 383 Sābūr founded in Baghdad an academy which, like the earlier foundation of Al Mamūn, was known as "The House of Wisdom." It was situated in Al Karkh, the largest quarter of West Baghdad, in the locality called "Between the Walls" and, according to Yāqūt, in Manṣūr Street.³ It is evident that the library was a significant feature of the academy, for the institution is sometimes referred to simply as "The Library" or "The Ancient Library." The endowment was sufficiently large that the institution did not suffer from the vicissitudes of its founder's career, for it was flourishing at the time of Sābūr's death in 416 (1025–26 A.D.). Authorities differ on the date of its destruction as on that of its beginning. Yāqūt asserts that the books were burned in 447 (1055 A.D.) when Tughril Beg, the Seljuk, entered the city of the Abbasids.⁴ But, according to Ibn

¹ *Fihrist*, pp. 267, 268; Hajji Khalifa, V, 385 ff.

² *Fihrist*, pp. 120, 125, l. 25.

³ Yāqūt, *Biographical dictionary*, VI, 358.

⁴ *Geographical dictionary*, I, 799.

al Athīr in the *Kamīl* and Al Bundari, this "House of Wisdom" survived the destruction and plundering of the Seljuk troops but was burned in a fire which swept through Al Karkh in 451 (1059 A.D.).¹

Yāḳūt's information, which was painstakingly gathered, often at first hand, is usually considered more accurate than that of writers (Ibn al Athīr, for example), who were essentially compilers. However, the topography of Al Karkh and its vicinity in Yāḳūt's writings is not accepted by many scholars as reliable, for it is neither self-consistent nor in agreement with information given by other writers. Apparently, Yāḳūt wrote his notices on this quarter of Baghdad some time after he left the city, and his memory failed him regarding details.² Whether or not the inaccuracies of his description apply also to dates in the history of Al Karkh is uncertain. There is, of course, the possibility that the library suffered twice from fire; and there may be a hint of this in the remark of Al Bundari concerning the fire which destroyed this library: "And it was one of the two conflagrations."³

Yāḳūt gives no details of the fire, but from Al Bundari and Ibn al Athīr one learns that all the books were not destroyed. Not only were the common folk guilty of plundering this rich storehouse of books; but Amīd al Mulk al Kunduri, Tughril Beg's vizier, whom Browne characterizes as a fine Arabic scholar, did not hesitate to help himself to its choicest treasures.⁴ Ibn al Athīr comments on his vandalism and selfishness, "What a difference there is between his act and the act of

¹ Ibn al Athīr, *Kamīl* (Cairo, 1302), X, 3, under year 451; M.Th. Houtsma, *Recueil de textes relatifs à l'histoire des Seldjucides*: Vol. II, *Histoire du Seldjucides d'Iraq par al-Bondāri* (Lugduni-Batavorum, 1889), p. 18; Olga Pinto in her article "Le Biblioteche degli Arabi nell'età degli Abbassidi," *La Bibliofilia*, XXX (1928); and Zettersteen, in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, article "Sābūr Ibn Ardāshīr," accept the earlier date. Adolf Grohmann says "beim Einzuge Togril Beys in Bagdad 450 d. H. = 1058-1059 n. Chr.": *Bibliotheken und Bibliophilen im Islamischen Orient*, *Festschrift der National-Bibliothek in Wien* (Vienna, 1926), p. 438; D. S. Margoliouth, *Letters of Abu l-'Ala* (Oxford, 1898), p. xxiv, gives 451 (1059 A.D.).

² See *Encyclopedia of Islam*, article "Al Karhk," and Guy LeStrange, *Baghdad during the Abbasid caliphate* (Oxford, 1900), pp. 84, 335 ff.

³ *Al Bundari*, p. 18.

⁴ E. G. Browne, *Literary history of the Persians* (4 vols.; London, 1902-6), II, 174.

Nizām al Mulk¹ who built colleges and gathered science into one in the land of Islam, all of it, and bequeathed books and other things!"²

It is apparent that part of the original endowment of Sābūr's academy consisted of a large collection of books, possibly the private library of the founder. The library of this institution is said to have contained 10,400 volumes, representative of the various departments of literature. Among them were a hundred volumes (the word used often applies specifically to copies of the Quran) in the handwriting of the Banu Mulka, two brothers, specimens of whose writings were much valued by collectors. It is not clear whether these figures apply to the size of Sābūr's original gift or to the extent of the collection at the time of the fire. At any rate, the library housed many precious books. Yāqūt says that they were all autographs of learned men. In his enthusiasm he asserts: "There were no more beautiful books than these in the world"³—a bit of praise, however, which he uses elsewhere of other collections, so that one may question his comparison which savors a bit of the effusions of modern advertisers. The expression "house of books" which is used by Yāqūt⁴ and by Abu l'Ala al Ma'ari⁵ seems to suggest that there was a library building, such as there certainly was at Shirāz and elsewhere.⁶

Sābūr's endowment provided for the maintenance of the establishment and, in all likelihood, necessities for some of the scholars who frequented it. He was so liberal in his gifts to poets that a chapter of Al Tha'alibi's *Anthology* is devoted to his encomiasts. Abu l'Ala al Ma'ari, the blind Syrian poet, generally regarded as a free thinker, was of the circle of literary men and musicians who made the academy of Sābūr one of the chief centers of the cultural life of Baghdad. Before retiring for the rest of his life to his home at Ma'arah in Syria, Abu l'Ala spent about a year and a half in Baghdad (1009-10 A.D.). Some of the letters written after his return speak of his longing to

¹ See the discussion of his library which follows.

² Ibn al Athīr, X, 3, under year 451.

³ *Geographical dictionary*, I, 799.

⁴ *Biographical dictionary*, VI, 358.

⁵ Letter VII.

⁶ Muqaddasī, p. 449.

again enjoy the opportunities afforded to men of his inclinations in the capital and especially in the "House of Wisdom." This is the theme of the letter¹ addressed to his friend Abu Maṣṣūr, custodian (or, according to Yāḳūt, librarian) of the "House of Wisdom." He says that those who would reproach him say, "Is thy passion for the 'House of Learning' from folly or sound sense?"² In Letter VII written to an uncle, referring to his desire to go to Baghdad, he said, "It was the library that attracted me thither."³ A line in one of his best-known poems, "And in the house of Sābūr a sprightly songstress enlivened our evenings with a voice as melodious as a dove's," apparently refers to the sort of entertainments which delighted this vizier as well as other patrons of the arts.⁴ At such times poets read odes to their benefactors, musicians sang and played, and learned men disputed. It is no wonder that Abu l'Ala missed these brilliant gatherings, at which his poems had been received and his keen wit appreciated, and longed to share in them once more.

One of the custodians of Sābūr's academy, 'Abd al Salām of Baṣrah, was a friend of Abu l'Ala. A letter and some verses which the poet wrote to him have been preserved.⁵ 'Abd al Salām was noted for his grammatical and geographical studies; his opinions are cited several times by Yāḳūt in his geographical dictionary. His abilities as a philologist are illustrated by an anecdote which Ibn Khallikān quotes from Abu l'Ala, who in turn claims to quote 'Abd al Salām, whom he describes as "keeper of the House of Knowledge at Baghdad, a man of veracity and a good friend of mine." 'Abd al Salām recalled an occasion when he was present at a class conducted by a noted grammarian, Abu Sa'īd al Sirāfi. A student was reading aloud from a philological work, and the master interrupted him to dissertate on a fine point of grammar illustrated by a quoted

¹ Letter XIX.

² Margoliouth's translation, p. 58, text p. 52.

³ *Ibid.*, translation, p. 40, text p. 32.

⁴ Saqt al Zand, II, 51, l. 12, and commentary following; *Ibn Khallikān*, I, 250 (DeSlane's translation, I, 555).

⁵ Letter XVI and Saqt al Zand, II, 100, 101, 112.

poem. ʿAbd al Salām differed openly with the professor’s explanation, thereby humiliating Al Sirāfi’s son who was present. He arose at once, returned to his shop (he was a butter merchant), sold his business, and took to study. He devoted himself exclusively to learning until he became a scholar of the highest rank, and then composed a treatise in which he explained the troublesome verses which had brought embarrassment to his august father.¹

Another custodian of the academy who was also a friend of Abu lʿAla was a certain Abu Maṣṣūr. Number XIX of the poet’s letters is addressed to him. In it is a reference to a poem which he composed in honor of Abu Maṣṣūr, whom he evidently held in high regard.² It was long thought that this Abu Maṣṣūr was otherwise unknown, but it is likely that he is to be identified with the Abu Maṣṣūr, librarian of the ancient library founded by Sābūr in Al Karkh, whose biography is given by Yāqūt.³ In a footnote, Margoliouth, editor of the “Gibb series” as well as of Abu lʿAla’s *Letters* (1898), says that this is the same man, but gives no explanation of the discrepancies in dates. Yāqūt says that Abu Maṣṣūr was born in 417 A.H. and died in 510, and also that his reputation was founded on a book in his writing in the year 432. To add to the complications he quotes from another author an anecdote purporting to give a trick played on Abu Maṣṣūr by a fellow-librarian. This incident is supposed to have taken place during the time that a celebrated theologian known as Al Murtaḍa was manager of the academy. Al Murtaḍa is said to have assumed this office a number of years after the death of Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr (died 416). It is known that Al Murtaḍa died in 436. Inasmuch as Abu lʿAla left Baghdad in 400, it would be impossible for him to have been a friend of the Abu Maṣṣūr mentioned by Yāqūt, if the dates of the latter are correct. Yāqūt, who does not connect Abu Maṣṣūr with Abu lʿAla, however, saw the difficulty of his Abu Maṣṣūr having served as librarian of the library of

¹ *Ibn Khallikān* (Bulaq, 1299), II, 362, ll. 16 ff. (DeSlane, IV, 407).

² *Saqt al Zand*, II, 121.

³ *Biographical dictionary*, “Gibb series,” VI (1913), 358 ff.

Sābūr's academy at the same time that Al Murtaḍa presided. He says that possibly the incident refers to the father of Abu Maṣṣūr, "but Allah is mighty and great and knows what is correct." It seems likely that this may be a story of the friend of Abu lʿAla, who also knew Al Murtaḍa; but it is uncertain whether he is the same man as the subject of Yāḳūt's biographical sketch. If he is, Yāḳūt's dates are mistaken or they have been copied incorrectly at some time.

The anecdote tells how Ibn Hamad, the associate of Abu Maṣṣūr, came to him with a report that the books of the library were fast being destroyed by fleas, and urged him to ask Al Murtaḍa to suggest some remedy. In consternation the senior librarian went to the head of the academy and with gravity and caution begged for immediate assistance in exterminating the fleas: "The books are at the point of perishing because of them." Al Murtaḍa exclaimed, "Fleas, fleas, Allah curse Ibn Hamad repeatedly, it is all a practical joke." Yāḳūt says that Abu Maṣṣūr, the librarian of the ancient library in Al Karkh, was a doctor of Shiʿite law, a man of letters, a grammarian, and the writer of a famous hand.

Whatever one makes of the confusion in Yāḳūt's sketch—whether one supposes there were two Abu Maṣṣūrs or one—and however one relates his conclusions to the friend of Abu lʿAla, there remain some glimpses into one of the great libraries of Baghdad. The position of librarian was filled by men of scholarly attainments, as in the library of Al Mamūn, and apparently there was sufficient endowment and work for two librarians, in addition to the director of the entire academy. The somewhat trivial anecdote shows the concern of a librarian for the books in his care, and also that librarians were not above playing the sort of pranks one might rather expect from run boys.

THE LIBRARY OF THE NIẒĀMĪYAH COLLEGE

When Ibn al Athīr deprecated the conduct of Al Kunduri, who plundered the library of Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr, he contrasted this act of vandalism with the generosity of NiẒām al Mulk,

who founded colleges and endowed them with books. Nizām al Mulk succeeded Al Kunduri as vizier to the first Seljuks and served Alp Arslan and his son Malik Shāh in this capacity for thirty years (455-485 [1063-92 A.D.]). Nizām, a Persian, was a man of cultivated tastes, much interested in the dissemination of learning. He removed the ban which had been placed on orthodox law and theology, and in 457 (1065 A.D.) he founded in East Baghdad a college designed especially for the propagation of Shafi'ite law.¹ This institution was opened two years later, and from then on for several centuries there are repeated references to scholars who studied and taught there. It appears that a professorship in the Nizāmīyah was of considerable importance, for each appointment had to be confirmed by the caliph, and historians record successive appointments as events of moment. Probably the best-known name among the professors of the Nizāmīyah is that of Al Ghazzālī, the great theologian and mystic who was appointed in 484 (1091 A.D.). Later he was appointed to a chair in a similar institution at Naysābūr, also founded by Nizām al Mulk.² Bahā al Dīn (died 1234), remembered chiefly as the biographer of Salāh al Dīn (Saladin), taught there, as did Abu Yusuf al Isfaraini (died 488 [1095 A.D.]), a noted Shafi'ite doctor who served both as teacher and librarian.³

Unfortunately, the rule of the great vizier was marked by acts of cruelty and violence. Shortly after taking office, he ordered two servants to put his predecessor, Al Kunduri, to death by slow torture. In like manner the Nizāmīyah at Baghdad was founded under a cloud of public disapproval, for Nizām al Mulk antagonized both common people and scholars by building his college on ground which he seized without recompensing those whose homes were razed. On the opening day, Abu Ishāq al Shirāzi, who had been appointed as chief professor, in protest to the unlawful seizure, failed to appear. Only

¹ Ibn al Athīr (Cairo, 1302), X, 19, under year 457.

² Yākūt, *Biographical dictionary*, III, 561; *Ibn Khallikān*, Wüstenfeld, No. 599, p. 114 (DeSlane's translation, II, 622 ff.).

³ H. F. Wüstenfeld, *Shafi'i*, III, 314.

after twenty days of argument was he persuaded to take up his duties as head of the school.¹

Nizām is frequently credited by Arabic writers with being the first to found *madrāsas*, that is, schools devoted especially to theological and related studies.² On the basis of this, some Western writers have said that before the founding of the Nizāmiyah there were no academies or colleges in Muslim lands. The houses of wisdom founded by Al Ma'mūn and Sābūr Ibn Ardashīr in Baghdad and that of the Fatimid caliph Al Hākim in Cairo would contradict the latter assumption. Two Arabic writers, Al Maḳrīzī and Al Suyūṭī, long ago pointed out that there were *madrāsas* in existence before the time of the Nizām. The city of Naysābūr alone boasted four such schools.³ At an earlier date Abu Hātim al Bustī (born 277 [890 A.D.]) founded in his native city, Bust, a school with a library and provided living-quarters and scholarships for foreign students.⁴ From the latter case, as well as that of Sābūr's academy (see p. 290), it would appear also that Al Subkī (died 771 [1369-70 A.D.]) was mistaken when he claimed that Nizām al Mulk was the first to make fixed allowances for the support of needy students. On the other hand, one must not minimize the vizier's generosity or the importance of his example, which was followed thereafter by other men of high rank.⁵

Owing to the liberal bequests of its founder, the Nizāmiyah long retained its pre-eminence among many similar schools in Baghdad. From time to time, travelers recorded their visits to this eminent school as to one of the sights of the caliphs' city. In 581 (1185 A.D.) Ibn Jubayr attended prayers at the Nizāmiyah, which he characterized as the most splendid of the

¹ Ibn al Athir, X, 19, under year 457; Wüstenfeld, *Academien der Araber und ihre Lehrer* (Göttingen, 1837), pp. 8 ff.

² Wüstenfeld, *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mekka* (Leipzig, 1857), III, 174, ll. 11 ff.; *Ibn Khallikān*, Wüstenfeld, No. 178, p. 115, l. 18 (DeSlane's translation, I, 414).

³ Al Maḳrīzī, IV, 192; Al Suyūṭī, *Ḥun al Muḥadara* (Cairo, 1299), II, 141 ff.

⁴ Wüstenfeld, *Shafi'i*, II, 263.

⁵ For full discussions of the beginnings of the *madrāsas* see article "Masdjid," *Encyclopædia of Islam*, p. 354, and DeSlane's Introduction to his translation of *Ibn Khallikān*, I, xxvii ff.

thirty-odd colleges of East Baghdad.¹ Previously, in 504 (1110 A.D.), the buildings had been thoroughly repaired, and were still in good condition when visited by Yākūt early in the thirteenth century A.D.² This institution survived the Mongol siege of 656 (1258 A.D.), for Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, about seventy-five years later (727 [1327 A.D.]), reported it in good repair and spoke of it as "the wonderful Nizāmīyah College, the excellence of which has become proverbial."³ Hamd Allah, a Persian historian, writing in 740 (1340 A.D.), and Ibn al Furāt, an Egyptian historian of the same century, knew the Nizāmīyah as the greatest college of Baghdad.⁴ The last professor of the Nizāmīyah mentioned by Arabic writers is Ghiyāth al Dīn, who died in 797 (1394 A.D.); so there is evidence that the school was in existence well into the fourteenth century. Its fate is unknown. It may finally have been absorbed in the nearby Mustanşiriyah, for, in the later years of its history, professors taught in both schools. Probably this college, like so many others, was destroyed by Tamerlane's hordes in the fifteenth century.⁵

Ibn al Athīr, it will be recalled, praised Nizām al Mulk for his gifts of books to the *madrassa* which bore his name. A friend of Yākūt, Ibnu l Najjar, a historian, willed his collection of books to the Nizāmīyah when he died in 643 (1245 A.D.).⁶ He followed a common custom whereby scholars and patrons of learning enriched the library of their favorite schools and provided safe-keeping for their own works and valuable collections.⁷ It was, however, the generosity of Caliph Al Nāṣir (caliph from 575 to 622 [1180–1225 A.D.]) which made the collection of the

¹ Ibn Jubayr, *Travels*, "Gibb series," pp. 219, 220, 229.

² Yākūt, *Geographical Dictionary*, I, 826; IV, 85.

³ C. DeFrémery and B. R. Sanguinetti, *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah* (4 vols.; Paris, 1854–74), II, 108.

⁴ Hamd Allah, *Nuzhāt al Kulub* (tr. LeStrange; London, 1915), p. 42; Ibn al Furāt, Vatican Arabic MS 726, p. 21.

⁵ R. Levy, "The Nizāmīyah Madrasa," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, LIX (1928), 270; Wüstenfeld, *Academien der Araber und ihre Lehrer*, pp. 288 ff. For a complete discussion of the Nizāmīyah see J. Ribera "Origen del Colegio Nidami de Baghdad" in *Estudios de Erudición Oriental*, Homenaje D. Francisco Codera (Zaragosa, 1904).

⁶ Al Kutubi, *Fawat* (Bulaq, 1283), II, 329 ff.

⁷ See pp. 279, 280.

Nizāmiyah one of the largest and most valuable that ever existed in a Muslim land. Ibn al Athīr says that in 589 this caliph ordered the building of a library for the Nizāmiyah and transferred to it (probably from his own palace) thousands of valuable books the like of which one does not see.¹ Ibn Khaldun, describing the unusually fine library in Cordoba founded by Al Ḥakam II (caliph 350–66 [961–76 A.D.]), was of the opinion that the richness of its book treasures was never surpassed by the library of anyone before or after except that of the Abbasid Al Nāṣir. If this is true, the library of the Nizāmiyah must have been very large and select, for Al Ḥakam is said to have owned four hundred thousand volumes, many of them exceedingly rare, representing all the departments of literature.² If, as it appears, Al Nāṣir gave his library to the Nizāmiyah, Gayangos is probably mistaken when he says in a note to volume II, page 473, of his translation of Al Makkari, that Al Nāṣir's library was destroyed by the Mongols under Hūlāgū at the taking of Baghdad (656 [1258 A.D.]), for it has been seen that this college was still flourishing a century after the Mongol invasion.

THE LIBRARY OF THE MUSTANŠIRĪYAH COLLEGE

The last great edifice built by the Abbasids in Baghdad was the college founded by the second last caliph, Al Mustanšir. According to Waṣṣaf, it was one of the good works on which the caliph spent the two basins or cisterns of gold left by his grandfather, Al Nāṣir.³ The date of its founding is usually given as 631 (1234 A.D.); but Niebuhr, in 1750, found and copied an inscription on the wall of the kitchen of the Mustanširīyah, which said the college was completed in 630 (1232–33 A.D.).⁴ At his time the building was used as a weighing-house; and, according to the article "Baghdad" in the *Encyclopedia of Islam*, page

¹ Ibn al Athīr (Cairo, 1302), XII, 67, under year 589.

² Ibn Khaldun, *Tarikh* (Bulaq, 1284), IV, 146; Al Makkari (Cairo, 1302), I, 180, quotes Ibn Khaldun; Al Maḳḳari (tr. Pascual de Gayangos; London, 1840), I, 169; R. A. Nicholson, *Literary history of the Arabs* (Cambridge, 1930), p. 419.

³ H. Howarth, *History of the Mongols* (London, 1888), III, 126.

⁴ See C. Niebuhr, *Reise Beschreibung nach Arabien* (Copenhagen, 1778), II, 295 ff.

567, it still stands close to the bank of the Tigris at the Bridge of Boats and is now used as a custom house. The inscription, which has almost disappeared, has been replaced by a modern one. Arab writers agree that the building or buildings of this college surpassed anything previously erected in a Muslim land. Ḥamd Allah, the Persian geographer (writing in 740 [1340 A.D.]) describes it as the most beautiful building in Baghdad. Abu Faraj, a contemporary of Al Mustanşir, and Ibn al Furāt (died 807 [1405 A.D.]) speak of the Mustanşiriyah not only as a very beautiful building but also as richly furnished and well equipped.¹ It appears questionable that on the academic side the school fulfilled Al Mustanşir's avowed purpose of establishing a college to eclipse the Nizāmīyah, for the older institution seems to have preserved its eminence as a center of learning and to have long attracted the best minds of Islam both as teachers and students. But certainly the new school offered students luxuries which had never been enjoyed in the older establishments. Perhaps it is an early example of the type of school which seeks to attract students by imposing buildings and modern equipment rather than by high standards of scholarship. Among the unusual features was a "chest of hours," probably some kind of clepsydra, which told the hours and appointed times for prayers. There were four mosques, one for each of the schools, a bathhouse for the students, and a hospital with a daily attendant physician, all within the college walls. Storage chambers for food, oil for lamps, and medicines, facilities for cooling drinking water, and a great kitchen which dispensed free meals to students and professors were among the conveniences.

The caliph was so enamored of his pious foundation that he visited it daily. He often sat in a belvedere in a garden adjoining the college from where he could listen unseen to the classes and discussions of the students. The college consisted of four halls devoted to the four orthodox schools. In each a professor presided over seventy-five students. The professors received

¹ Ḥamd Allah, *Nuzhāt al ʿUlub* (LeStrange's translation), p. 42; Abu Faraj (Beirut, 1890), p. 425; Ibn al Furāt, Vatican Arab MS 726, pp. 20, 21.

monthly salaries; and each student, in addition to free instruction and living, received one gold *dinar* a month. This contrasts with the frugality of earlier times, when teachers often received no regular salaries but were dependent on gifts from their students.¹ Ibn Baṭṭūṭṭah, who visited Baghdad in 727 (1327 A.D.), almost a century after the Mustanṣiriyyah was founded, describes the professor of law who lectured in the great hall "seated under a small wooden cupola on a chair covered by a carpet, speaking with much sedateness and gravity of mien, he being clothed in black and wearing a turban; and there were besides two assistants, one on either hand, who repeated in a loud voice the dictation of the teacher."²

After praising the beauty of the Mustanṣiriyyah and its unusually rich endowments, Ibn al Furāt speaks of the library (House of Books) which Al Mustanṣir arranged for the benefit of those who frequented it. "In it were innumerable precious books in all the categories of the sciences." They were arranged for the convenience of those who would consult and copy them. Free paper, pens, and lamps were provided for those students who wished to build up private collections by copying the treasures of the library.³ Perhaps the Arabic writer Qutbi l Dīn was not exaggerating when he asserted that no other college owned more books than did the Mustanṣiriyyah.⁴

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¹ *Chroniken der Stadt Mekka*, III, 174; Abu Faraj, p. 425.

² *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah*, Arabic text, II, 108 (LeStrange's translation [Baghdad], pp. 268-69).

³ Ibn al Furāt, p. 20.

⁴ *Chroniken der Stadt Mekka*, III, 174.